"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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## The Characteristics of a Christian Rural Community*

*The Hubbardsville—East Hamilton Community, New York*

By Stanley E. Skinner

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I

A Description of the Community

If you were motoring on the Utica-Norwich-Binghamton highway, eleven miles south of Waterville you would pass through a small settlement called Hubbardsville. One mile farther south you would pass through a neighboring settlement called East Hamilton. These settlements are so close together that we shall describe them as one rural community.

There are two churches in this community. The Church of Christ is located in Hubbardsville and the Methodist Church is located in East Hamilton. There are two general stores, one milk plant, a G.L.F. (cooperative society) plant and a railroad station. The population count of Hubbardsville is one hundred and eight; that of East Hamilton only twenty-seven. Our community may, therefore, be considered for the most part open country. These two settlements are hemmed in by three natural boundaries. On the north lies the nine-mile swamp and on either side are the steep hills running parallel north and south, forming the upper Chenango valley which cradles our community.

There are two main types of farming: dairy farming and commercialized truck farming. Some farmers diversify their farming, combining dairying with a cultivated crop such as potatoes. The products raised on our farms are mainly potatoes, beans, peas and cabbage. Dairying is, however, the predominant type of farming in this locality.

Our rural neighborhood briefly described is only four miles east and north of the village of Hamilton. Hamilton may be regarded as the rural community center inasmuch as we do a substantial amount of trading there, draw upon its professional services, send most of our children to the centralized school and may also send our local boys to Colgate University located in that community.

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*This paper won first prize in the recent essay contest conducted by the Christian Rural Fellowship on the subject, "What Are the Characteristics of a Christian Rural Community?" Rev. Skinner is the pastor of the Methodist Church at Hubbardsville, New York.

II

A. The Extent To Which The Community May Be Considered Christian and The Forces Which Have Contributed To Its Present Christian Character

1. The Home. The family may be considered the basic institution of our American civilization for it is through the family that our present generation is able to wield a Christian influence and control over the heredity and environment of the coming generation. We find that the strength and success of our church work is directly dependent upon the nature of our homes. Parents who take a real interest in their children cooperate with our church leaders. The strongest families participate in the various church activities. What is most important--the strongest families are those which are willing to give time, money and effort to improve themselves in order to get the most out of life. This benefits, of course, not only the family but the entire community. These active church families are very often found to be active also in other community activities and organizations. They take a greater interest in the rural youth agencies. In some cases, the children have been taken into the confidence of the parents, sharing with the parents in the responsibility of carrying on the farm and home life to the extent of owning parcels of land, crops, or livestock. Our community is Christian to the extent it is endeavoring to foster such homes which promise to be the foundation for the future of American democracy.

2. The School. Our schools may be listed as another important institution in the building of our Christian rural community. Although we are in the beginning stages of our centralized school system, there are many who feel that the children will receive many benefits they could not have received had they remained in the small district schools. Locally, we are fortunate in having school teachers with excellent Christian character. They take a personal interest in their pupils and are able to do so because the number of pupils is not large. The school is not regarded as a separate unit doing an exclusive piece of work, but as one agency working hand in hand with the home, the church and other rural agencies.

3. The Church. Our churches are making their contribution to the degree in which they are lending inspiration and guidance. The Church of Christ is a creedal church making a real contribution to the lives of those associated with it, but limited in its cooperative outreach. As this church is not large enough to have a regular pastor, they have lay leadership. The larger church of the community is the Methodist Church which carries on more activities. The pastor calls in the homes of both the church and non-church people. He is acquainted with their problems and helps where that is possible. This church tries to keep in contact with the families in dire need so as to help them in a way which will be constructive. Some of the members of the church are ready and willing to follow wherever the "love of Christ" constrains them to meet the human and spiritual need of men. This conception of a church member's task is not shared by all, but it is significant that such vision finds root in a few. This church is trying to be a truly rural church. The pastor has worked with others to indicate the relationship of religion to the problems of the farm. A modest effort was made along that line when the pastor, serving as a chairman of a committee, made a study of the milk situation from the point of view of Christian principles. A definite effort has been made by the pastor to convey the idea that all work may be thought of as a spiritual task. Through preaching and calling, the pastor has

In an ideal Christian community, the church, whose Founder came to bring the abundant life, should furnish the vision. The Christian church should initiate, if necessary, or at least sponsor and work shoulder to shoulder with other community organizations for the improvement of rural life, whether it be soil conservation or the improvement of dairies or the building of character. Every such project comes within the stewardship concept of life. Good Christian stewards are those who are endeavoring to perform the will of God in all areas of life.

An ideal Christian community is a community that is hard at work making its homes more permanent. Shifting populations make for poor homes, the rearing of children hazardous, undermine productive citizenship and make impossible successful farming. An ideal Christian community should have permanent homes.

An ideal Christian community should be able to inspire a good percentage of its own members to become the leaders of its own organizations. Where this is impossible, urban centers might be appealed to to supplement rural leadership with their own in recognition of the fact that they have drawn heavily themselves upon rural areas.

The ideal Christian community should seek to build greater cooperation and understanding. We know, for instance, that agricultural life and industrial life are dependent upon one another for their success. Such being the case, there is need for the representatives of each group to become acquainted with the needs of the other group, and cooperate for the common good.

The ideal Christian community should be protective. Just as the farmer is watchful lest some pest destroy a highly prized crop, so must the ideal community be watchful lest it adopt harmful practices and modes of living from our more highly paganized centers of living. The ideal community should meet this problem in a positive manner by supplying creative amusements, good reading, neighborhood gatherings and other programs which shall strengthen and make for sound social contacts.

The ideal Christian community is the kind of community whose leaders cease looking elsewhere for the solution of its problems. They will know that no magic from without will solve its problems. They will assume that the strengthening and upbuilding of any community result from a slow, sacrificial, cooperative, evolving process. Yet, while these leaders are convinced that each community must work out the solution to its own problems, they are also mindful of the fact that very often their work could be lightened and improved by cooperating with the leaders of other communities. And finally, the leaders of the ideal community will credit the success, value and permanence of their solutions to the insight they have gained from some understanding of the relation of the problems of their own community to national and even world problems.

## IV

## The Extent To Which The Christian Characteristics May Be Reproducible in Other Communities

The Christian characteristics mentioned in this paper may be reproduced in every community. The first real requisite is for one or more persons to become

is more, we find these qualities sometimes too well developed in the lives of good people too. Probably our own community is much like others in this respect. While no serious rivalry exists between the two churches, the religious interests of Hubbardsville and East Hamilton would be better served by one church.

Among other factors which make for the non-Christian character of our community are the increase of abandoned farms, the increase of farm tenancy, low economic income, the disparity of farm prices and urban prices. Still another factor to be considered which retards Christian growth is the separate way in which each agency goes about its task with little or no reference to the work carried out by the others. Much leadership-energy might be conserved, time saved, and a far more efficient program worked out for the entire community should the various agencies which seek to serve the needs of the community cooperate in planning their community program. We might point out that the lack of cooperation among farmers themselves is a factor which leads to the non-Christian character of the community. We find that where one farm group fights another it weakens their whole representative force, making them easy prey to any group which seeks to gain its own interest at their expense.

Although we have already spoken of the automobile, improved highways and radio as modern inventions and improvements which have reduced the drudgery of farm and home life, it needs to be pointed out that the combination of all three has also proved to be a serious rival to some of our most worth while community programs. All too often the automobile has made it possible for our young people to find their amusement outside our community and in undesirable and unwholesome surroundings. The commercial form of amusement which too often appeals to the weakness of human nature furnishes a serious challenge to the community to provide wholesome and creative amusements.

## III

## The Characteristics of An Ideal Christian Community

An ideal Christian community must have consecrated leaders, for in such a community there can be no distinction made between secular and sacred work. The leaders of all organizations must feel that they have sacred work to perform, be it church work or grange work. The work of all such organizations is sacred because their ultimate purpose is the building of character. Character is the greatest product of our countryside. This being true, our consecrated leaders, teachers, doctors, lawyers, organization leaders, ministers and others must consider the countryside, with its greater number of children, as the ideal and permanent place in which to carry out their life calling.

Now, if the purpose of an ideal Christian community is that of building character, our program should be a united one. In an ideal Christian community, the organizations, institutions and programs exist for the people, not the people for them. This being the case, the nature and number of organizations, institutions and programs will be determined by the needs of the people. Each organization should perform its express function, complementing, as it were, the work performed by the other organizations. What these needs are should be determined by a carefully executed survey of the community.

emphasized the importance of rural life and work. Young people have been encouraged to devote their lives to rural work, as others feel called to other types of work. The Methodist Church has sought to meet the needs of the young people by sharing with other churches in conducting young people's camps, training schools and institutes. The churches of nine communities are at the present time cooperating in the carrying out of their young people's programs. The church has also taken seriously its obligation to meet the recreational needs of the community. It may be said that the Methodist Church has begun to take seriously the responsibility of gearing its program into the needs of the people.

4. The Government. Several new agencies have arisen in recent years to meet the needs of the rural area. They have sponsored such programs as the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Youth Administration. Perhaps we are living too close to the beginnings of such organizations to tell the real effect they will have upon the future of our communities. Certainly, we know that they have met an urgent need. We know that the many educational programs sponsored by our agricultural agencies have improved the methods of farming and the keeping of the farm home. It has enabled the farmer to conserve the soil, improve the wood lot, the pasture and many other crops in addition to the improvement of all livestock. The improved roads have been a real aid to farmers in our community. The extension of rural electrification has helped the farmers and enabled them to use many other modern conveniences which are operated by electricity. The Home Bureau, the 4-H Club, the health clinics all have contributed remarkably to the betterment of rural living. All such agencies have helped our people to learn how to help themselves and others within limited means.

While speaking of the various institutions, organizations, personalities and forces that have contributed to the Christian character of the community, we should not neglect to refer to our general stores. While they do charge more than the chain stores, they are existing by reason of their proximity. They also serve as a credit agency to farmers who need groceries but who do not have the cash to pay for them when the groceries are purchased. Our local newspapers which are published in the neighboring communities of Earlville and Hamilton cover our territory well and serve to remind us of the interests which we have in common. Telephones, radios, and automobiles, together with modern farm and home equipment, have definitely reduced the drudgery of farm life and have helped the rural family to live a far more pleasant and efficient life.

B. The Extent To Which The Community May Not Be Considered Christian and The Forces Which Are Responsible For Its Non-Christian Character

There still exists to some degree denominational prejudice which may be regarded as a smoke-screen which some individuals use to cover their refusal to accept their religious responsibility in the community. Such prejudice does exist, however, and it definitely thwarts Christian work in the community. There exists also a narrowly conceived loyalty to the various organizations in the community. This unavoidably causes friction and ill-will among members of worth while groups. Leaders of rural organizations are in agreement that intolerance, provincialism, lack of self-discipline in thought and speech, and shortsightedness are all forces in a community which spell death to true community progress and goodwill. What

deeply concerned about our present community life. The next step is to get the necessary training. This training for rural leadership is amply provided by state agricultural agencies and by religious organizations. Extension agents and church leaders will be glad to set the machinery going. The leaders of all the vital organizations may then be called together to consider forming a town or community council. This council should make a study of the community and seek to adapt its program to the needs of the people. The Christian church should be given a central place in this program, for these things cannot be accomplished through the power of man alone. When our hearts are strangely warmed by a vision of what an ideal Christian community may be, we find that God supplies the strength and the courage that enable us to make that vision concrete in the relationships among our fellowmen. By continuing our faith in God and cooperating with Him, we are assured that these Christian characteristics may be reproducible in other communities.

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The Christian Rural Fellowship is a membership organization composed of ordained and lay people interested in the quality of rural life around the world. It is sponsored by the three Protestant groups in America most interested in the rural church at home and abroad. These three groups are the Committee on Town and Country of the Home Missions Council and Federal Council of Churches, the Rural Missions Cooperating Committee of the Foreign Missions Conference of North America, and Agricultural Missions, Inc.

The Fellowship is both interdenominational and international. Members are found in many lands. It is the only religious organization that attempts to tie together the rural leaders in all lands in the interests of a Christian rural civilization. It is in every sense a fellowship. This fellowship is provided through the Bulletins which are sent regularly, ten times a year, to all members, news-letters, quarterly Agricultural Missions Notes, annual meetings and local conferences.

State Christian Rural Fellowships have been organized in New York, Iowa, Ohio, Nebraska and Indiana. Inquiries from other states indicate an increasing interest in the organization as a possible means of providing that necessary fellowship by which experiences and problems can be shared and cooperation secured toward a more effective rural church program in terms of the larger community needs.

There are four types of membership: Subscribing $1.00; Contributing $5.00; Sustaining $10; Patron $25.

A complete list of Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletins will be sent on request.